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Ideas to fix health-care system sought

Hatch, Bennett seek input in meeting at S.L. hotel

By Stephen Speckman

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Everyday people had their chance Saturday morning to offer Washington leaders suggestions on how to fix what many believe is a broken health-care system in the United States.

As part of the ongoing discussions taking place around the country in meetings with the Citizens' Health Care Working Group, about 100 people at a hotel in Salt Lake City tackled four questions Congress wants answered.

What health-care benefits and services should be provided?

How does the American public want health care delivered?

How should health-care coverage be financed?

What trade-offs are the American public willing to make in either benefits or financing to ensure access to affordable, high-quality health-care coverage and services?

Utah Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch, credited as the driving force behind the creation of the national working group, and Sen. Bob Bennett primed the pump before people broke off into discussion groups.

Bennett urged everyone to use Hatch's expertise and interest in health-care issues as a sounding board for ideas and concerns.

"Pay attention, because Orrin in two years is going to be chairman of the finance committee, which will be the committee that has to deal with this," Bennett said. "So, if you have anything you want to tell him before he ascends to that great height, do it now."

Before introducing Hatch, Bennett reminded the audience how the provider system and payment system, which most assume is an integrated health-care system, were not rationally designed and how they both have different agendas.

By the numbers, among the system's problems are that nearly 46 million Americans do not have health insurance and that in less than 10 years the cost of health care per person will rise from \$6,400 to almost \$11,000.

Other figures include:

- An estimated 44,000 to 98,000 deaths annually occur due to medical errors.
- On average, adults get 55 percent of the recommended care for many common conditions.
- In Utah, nearly 300,000 lack health insurance, immunization rates are among the lowest in the nation, suicide rates among adolescent males are above the country's average, and a majority of Utah adults and children struggle with weight issues.

"What can I say?" Hatch said about the subject of obesity in Utah. "Maybe our state should not have made Jell-O as our official snack food — we do love our sweets here in Utah."

Hatch went on to reaffirm that there are many problems in the health-care system and that meaningful discussion among everyday people is needed to get to the bottom of the problems.

When the process of public input via the working group meetings is complete, Hatch said he hopes Congress will be closer to a national consensus on how to improve the country's health-care system.

Hatch said the 15-member working group will make recommendations on health-care improvements to lawmakers in Washington after the end of town hall meetings that so far have been held in 36 states the past year.

"The citizens working group is not being run by Washington bureaucrats," Hatch assured. "Therefore we do not expect Washington solutions. As many of you know, Washington solutions can get you into trouble."

For more information on the working group, visit the Web site, www.citizenshealthcare.gov.

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